The Birth of Jesus

Bible Stories Anthology — Luke 1–2; Matthew 1–2

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

The Promise Four Thousand Years in the Making

Most of us know this story from Christmas cards: a stable, a donkey, an ox, three kings on camels kneeling beside a glowing baby on a snowy night. Almost none of that is in the Bible.

What the Bible does record is far more remarkable. In a garden, at the very beginning, God promised a coming seed of the woman who would crush the head of the adversary (Genesis 3:15). For some four thousand years, through Noah, Abraham, Judah and David, God kept that promise alive. Then, in a small village in Galilee, a young woman engaged to a carpenter was told that she would bear a son — without a human father. That child was the seed of the woman at last: the only person in history whose Father was God Himself.

This is the story of how the promise came. It is full of ordinary people — a frightened girl, a man who had every reason to walk away, shepherds nobody respected, an old man and an old widow in the temple, foreign stargazers, and a murderous king. And it is full of God, keeping His word to the letter.

The Setting

When. "In the days of Herod the king" (Matthew 2:1). Herod the Great ruled Judaea for Rome for more than thirty years, and he died shortly after Jesus was born. The usual date given for his death is 4 B.C., though a good number of scholars place it in 1 B.C. (The calendar that counts "B.C." and "A.D." was worked out centuries later, and it missed by a few years.) This series, following the chronology it has worked with in its other studies, understands the birth to have taken place about 3 B.C. The Bible does

not give the day or month, and nothing in it points to December 25; that date does not appear in any record until centuries after the apostles.

Where. The story moves between Nazareth, a small village in the hills of Galilee in the north; Bethlehem, "the city of David," about six miles south of Jerusalem; Jerusalem and its temple; and Egypt, where the family fled for safety.

Who. Mary, a young virgin of Nazareth; Joseph, a descendant of David; the angel Gabriel; shepherds near Bethlehem; Simeon and Anna in the temple; wise men from the east; Herod the king; and the child Jesus.

The situation. Israel was a subject people, ruled by Rome through Herod — a brilliant builder and a paranoid killer who was not even fully a Jew by descent (his family were Idumeans, descendants of Esau, who had been forced to convert). Many in Israel were "waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25) — for the promised Messiah, the anointed King of David's line, to come and redeem them.

This is still the **Mosaic Law administration**. The child was "made under the law" (Galatians 4:4): circumcised on the eighth day, presented at the temple, with offerings made for His mother "according to the law of Moses." The next administration, the administration of Christ, would not open until some thirty years later, at His baptism, when a voice from heaven declared, "Thou art my beloved Son" (Luke 3:22). But everything that administration would bring began here, in a village girl's "be it unto me according to thy word."

The Story, Told Faithfully

The Promise Behind the Story

Before we open Luke and Matthew, we need to go back to the beginning.

> **Genesis 3:15** *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*

When Adam and Eve fell, God spoke to the serpent — the adversary — and promised a coming "seed" of "the woman." Everywhere else in scripture, a child is spoken of as the seed of a man: Abraham's seed, David's seed. Only here is a child called "her seed." As this series understands it, that unusual wording was the first hint of how the Redeemer would come: born of a woman, but not fathered by a man. Paul says it plainly:

> **Galatians 4:4** *But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law,*

"The fulness of the time" — God had a schedule, and He kept it. "Made of a woman" — a real human birth. Four thousand years after the promise, the time was full.

Gabriel Comes to Nazareth

> **Luke 1:26** *And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth,*

> **Luke 1:27** *To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.*

"The sixth month" — six months after Gabriel had appeared to an old priest named Zacharias in the temple, promising that his barren wife Elisabeth would have a son. That son would be John the Baptist.

Nazareth was nowhere. It is never once mentioned in the Old Testament or by the Jewish historian Josephus. It was a small farming village of perhaps a few hundred people. "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" someone would later ask (John 1:46). God sent His greatest announcement there.

"A virgin espoused to a man." **Espoused** means *betrothed*. In Israel, betrothal was far more than an engagement today. It was a legally binding contract, made in front of witnesses, usually a year before the wedding. The couple were called husband and wife (Matthew 1:19-20 calls Joseph "her husband" and Mary "thy wife"), but they did not yet live together or come together as man and wife. A betrothal could only be ended by a formal divorce. Mary was probably young, as girls in that culture were usually betrothed in their early or middle teens.

> **Luke 1:28** *And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women.*
>
> **Luke 1:29** *And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.*
>
> **Luke 1:30** *And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.*

"Highly favoured" translates one Greek word meaning *graced* or *shown great favour*. It describes what God had given Mary, not something she possessed to give to others. It is the same root Paul uses when he says God "hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Ephesians 1:6) — every believer has been "graced" in the same way.

"She was troubled." Mary was not calm. She was a young girl confronted by an angel, and she was trying to work out what his greeting meant.

How Shall This Be?

> **Luke 1:31** *And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.*
>
> **Luke 1:32** *He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David:*
>
> **Luke 1:33** *And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end.*

Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Yeshua* (Joshua), meaning *the LORD is salvation* or *the LORD saves*. It was a common name. What made this child uncommon was not His name but His Father.

"The throne of his father David." God had sworn to David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Acts 2:30). Both Joseph and Mary, as this series understands the two family lines in Matthew 1 and Luke 3, were descended from David.

> **Luke 1:34** *Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?*

“I know not a man” is a Hebrew way of saying *I have never been with a man*. The verb “know” is used in scripture for sexual relations, as in “Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived” (Genesis 4:1). This figure of speech is called **euphemism** — a gentle or modest expression used in place of a blunt one. Mary was not doubting; she was asking *how*. She was a virgin, and she knew how children come.

> **Luke 1:35** *And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.*

This is the heart of the story, so read it slowly.

“The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee.” The two halves say the same thing in different words, which is a common pattern in Hebrew speech called **parallelism**. “The Holy Ghost” (better, *holy spirit*) and “the power of the Highest” are the same act: God, who is holy and who “is a Spirit” (John 4:24), would by His own power create life in Mary’s womb. “Overshadow” is the word used of the cloud that overshadowed Jesus and the disciples on the mount of transfiguration — God’s presence resting on someone.

“Therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.” Notice the word **therefore**. Gabriel gives the reason Jesus would be called the Son of God: because God would be His Father. The angel does not say He *was already* the Son before His conception; he says the child “which shall be born of thee” would be *called* the Son of God *because* of how He was conceived. A son comes from a father. Jesus is God’s Son — really, uniquely, the only begotten — not God the Son. As this series holds throughout, “there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 2:5).

> **Luke 1:36** *And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren.*
>
> **Luke 1:37** *For with God nothing shall be impossible.*
>
> **Luke 1:38** *And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her.*

Gabriel gave Mary a sign she could check: her old, barren relative was six months pregnant. “For with God nothing shall be impossible” — literally, *no word from God shall be without power*.

“Be it unto me according to thy word.” Consider what Mary was agreeing to. She was betrothed. She would be pregnant before the wedding. Her village would count the months. Joseph might divorce her. Under the Law, a betrothed woman found to have been with another man could be stoned (Deuteronomy 22:23-24), though in Mary’s day that penalty was rarely carried out. She would carry the whispers her whole life (compare John 8:41, where Jesus’ enemies sneered, “We be not born of fornication”). She said yes anyway. “Handmaid” means *female servant* — Mary called herself God’s servant.

Mary then went to visit Elisabeth, and in her song of praise she said, “My spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour” (Luke 1:47). Mary needed a Saviour, as every human being does. She was a woman of great faith, but she was not sinless, and scripture never asks anyone to pray to her or through her.

Joseph’s Dilemma

Matthew tells the story from Joseph’s side.

> **Matthew 1:18** *Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.*
>
> **Matthew 1:19** *Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.*

Imagine Joseph's position. The woman he was betrothed to came back from three months in Judaea, and she was pregnant. He knew the child was not his. Whatever Mary told him, it would have sounded impossible.

Joseph was "a just man" — righteous, faithful to God's Law. The Law meant he could not simply go ahead and marry her as though nothing had happened. But he was also kind. He did not want to "make her a publick example" — to shame her publicly, in court. So he planned to "put her away privily" — to divorce her quietly, before two or three witnesses, with as little disgrace as possible.

> **Matthew 1:20** *But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.*
>
> **Matthew 1:21** *And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.*

"Thou son of David" — the angel reminded Joseph of his own royal descent. By taking Mary as his wife and naming the child, Joseph would make Jesus his legal son and heir, with a legal claim to David's line.

"He shall save his people from their sins." That is what the name means. The child was not coming mainly to drive out Rome. He was coming to deal with sin.

"God With Us"

> **Matthew 1:22** *Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,*
>
> **Matthew 1:23** *Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us.*

Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14. The Hebrew word Isaiah used, *'almah*, means *a young woman of marriageable age*, a word used of an unmarried girl; the Greek translation of the Old Testament, made some two centuries before Christ, rendered it *parthenos*, *virgin*, and Matthew follows it. Whatever debate there is over Isaiah's word, Luke leaves none about Mary: "I know not a man."

"Emmanuel… God with us." Does this mean Jesus is God? No. Many Hebrew names contain God's name — *Elijah* means *my God is the LORD*; *Ezekiel* means *God strengthens* — and no one thinks those men were God. The name declares what God was doing through this child: in Him, God was with His people. Jesus Himself would say, "the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works" (John 14:10). God was with us — in and through His Son.

> **Matthew 1:24** *Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife:*
>
> **Matthew 1:25** *And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.*

Joseph obeyed at once. He took Mary as his wife and accepted the shame that would fall on both of them. He is one of the quiet heroes of scripture.

"Knew her not *till*…" — Joseph and Mary did not come together as husband and wife until after Jesus was born. "Till" implies that afterward they did. The Bible later names Jesus' brothers — "James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas" — and speaks of His sisters (Matthew 13:55-56). Mary did not remain a virgin for life; that idea came from later church tradition, not from scripture. And Jesus was her "firstborn" son — the first of several children.

To Bethlehem

> **Luke 2:1** *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.*

Luke 2:2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

> **Luke 2:3** *And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.*
>
> **Luke 2:4** *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)*
>
> **Luke 2:5** *To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor, ruled the known world. "All the world" is **synecdoche** — a figure of speech in which a whole stands for a part (or a part for a whole); here it means the Roman world. "Taxed" means *registered* or *enrolled* — a census. The emperor in Rome issued a decree for his own reasons. God used it to move a carpenter and his pregnant wife ninety miles south, to the very town the prophet Micah had named centuries earlier.

Cyrenius (Quirinius) is known from Roman records as governor of Syria in A.D. 6, some years after this. Luke, a careful historian, knew that. Several solutions have been offered: that Quirinius served in Syria twice, or in a special role earlier; that Luke's word "first" should be read "*before* Cyrenius was governor"; or, as some historians have argued, that this was the empire-wide registration of loyalty to Augustus in about 3–2 B.C., when he was given the title "Father of the Country." Scripture does not settle it, but the difficulty is not a reason to doubt Luke.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem took several days on foot, over hills, in the last weeks of Mary's pregnancy.

No Room in the Guest Room

> **Luke 2:6** *And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.*
>
> **Luke 2:7** *And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

This one verse is all the Bible says about the birth itself. There is no innkeeper, no stable, no ox and ass (they come from a later reading of Isaiah 1:3), and no cave (that tradition first appears in the second century).

"The inn." The Greek word is *kataluma*. It is the word used for the "guestchamber" where Jesus ate the last Passover with His disciples (Luke 22:11). When Luke means a commercial inn, in the parable of the

Good Samaritan, he uses a different word (*pandocheion*, Luke 10:34). So the *kataluma* here was most likely the guest room of a family home. Joseph was returning to his family's town; he would naturally have stayed with relatives. Their guest room was already full — perhaps with others who had come for the same census.

In village homes of that time, the family lived on a raised floor, and the animals were often brought into a lower level at the end of the room at night, with feeding troughs — **mangers** — cut into the floor or set along the edge of the raised platform. As this series understands it, Mary gave birth in the main family room of a crowded house and laid her son in the animals' feeding trough because it was the only safe, clean-enough place to lay Him. It was humble. It was not the lonely, rejected scene of the Christmas plays.

"Swaddling clothes" were long strips of cloth wrapped snugly around a newborn to keep the limbs straight and warm, as every mother in Israel did. Ezekiel describes an abandoned baby as one who "wast not salted at all, nor swaddled at all" (Ezekiel 16:4) — to be swaddled was to be cared for. Jesus was a real baby, born and wrapped like any other.

Shepherds in the Night

> **Luke 2:8** *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*
>
> **Luke 2:9** *And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

Shepherds were near the bottom of society. They lived outdoors, smelled of sheep, and could not keep the ceremonial washings of the religious. Later rabbinic writings even list shepherds among those whose testimony was not accepted in court. God sent His first birth announcement to men whose word would not have counted as evidence.

The fields around Bethlehem were where David had kept his father's sheep a thousand years before. Some ancient Jewish writings speak of flocks pastured near Bethlehem that were destined for the temple sacrifices. If so, as this series understands it, the shepherds who watched the sacrificial lambs were the first to hear that the Lamb of God had been born.

"Abiding in the field… by night." Shepherds lived out in the open with their flocks in the warmer months, from spring through autumn. It is not impossible in winter, but it fits the warmer season better — one more reason December 25 is unlikely.

> **Luke 2:10** *And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*
>
> **Luke 2:11** *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.*
>
> **Luke 2:12** *And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

"Good tidings" is one Greek word, from which we get *evangel* — the gospel, the good news. "To all people" — not only to Israel.

Three titles in one breath: **Saviour**, the one who rescues; **Christ**, Greek for *Messiah*, *the Anointed One*, the promised King; and **Lord**. Peter would later say that God "hath made that same Jesus… both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). He is Lord because God made Him Lord.

“This shall be a sign.” A baby in swaddling clothes was nothing unusual. A newborn lying in a feeding trough was. The shepherds could find Him by it.

> **Luke 2:13** *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,*
> **Luke 2:14** *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

“The heavenly host” — an army of angels. The Bible does not say they sang, only that they were “praising God, and saying.”

“On earth peace, good will toward men.” Many of the oldest Greek manuscripts read, *on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased* — or *among men of His good pleasure*. Either way, the peace comes from God’s goodwill toward people, not from human effort. The peace Christ brings is first peace with God.

> **Luke 2:15** *And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*
> **Luke 2:16** *And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.*
> **Luke 2:17** *And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.*
> **Luke 2:18** *And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.*
> **Luke 2:19** *But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*
> **Luke 2:20** *And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.*

The shepherds believed, went, found, and told. Men whose testimony did not count in court became the first to spread the news.

“Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.” She treasured them and turned them over, trying to fit them together. She had much to ponder. She would ponder more thirty-three years later, at a cross.

Eight Days and Forty Days

> **Luke 2:21** *And when eight days were accomplished for the circumcising of the child, his name was called JESUS, which was so named of the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*

Every Israelite boy was circumcised on the eighth day, the sign of God’s covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17:12). Jesus was “made under the law,” and He kept it from the beginning.

> **Luke 2:22** *And when the days of her purification according to the law of Moses were accomplished, they brought him to Jerusalem, to present him to the Lord;*
>
> **Luke 2:23** (As it is written in the law of the Lord, Every male that openeth the womb shall be called holy to the Lord;)
>
> **Luke 2:24** *And to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.*

Forty days after the birth of a son, a mother came to the temple for her purification (Leviticus 12:2-4). The offering was to be a lamb, but the Law made room for the poor:

> **Leviticus 12:8** *And if she be not able to bring a lamb, then she shall bring two turtles, or two young pigeons; the one for the burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering: and the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be clean.*

Joseph and Mary brought the birds. They were poor. And notice: one of the birds was a **sin offering**, and the priest made an atonement for Mary. Mary kept the Law like every other mother in Israel.

There is a quiet irony here. They could not afford a lamb. They were carrying one.

Simeon and Anna

> **Luke 2:25** *And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.*
> **Luke 2:26** *And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ.*
> **Luke 2:27** *And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law,*
> **Luke 2:28** *Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said,*
> **Luke 2:29** *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:*
> **Luke 2:30** *For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,*
> **Luke 2:31** *Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;*
> **Luke 2:32** *A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.*

Simeon had been waiting for years. *The holy spirit was upon him* — in the Law administration, God's spirit came *upon* certain believers for a purpose, as it had on prophets and kings. God had revealed to him that he would not die before he saw the Messiah. He took the baby in his arms and said, *Now I can die in peace.*

"Mine eyes have seen thy salvation." He held a baby and called Him *salvation* — the very meaning of the name Jesus.

"A light to lighten the Gentiles." Even in the temple, on the day of a Law ceremony, God announced that this child was for the nations, too.

> **Luke 2:33** *And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him.*
> **Luke 2:34** *And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against;*
>
> **Luke 2:35** (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Then Simeon turned to Mary with a warning. Her son would be "spoken against." And "a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also." The sword is a **metaphor** — a figure of speech that speaks of one thing as though it were another. It pictures the grief Mary would feel. She would stand near the cross and watch her son die (John 19:25).

> **Luke 2:36** *And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity;*
>
> **Luke 2:37** *And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day.*
>
> **Luke 2:38** *And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem.*

Anna had been married seven years, then widowed. She was either eighty-four years old, or she had been a widow for eighty-four years (which would make her over a hundred) — the Greek can be read either way. She was "of the tribe of Aser" — Asher, one of the ten northern tribes carried away by Assyria seven centuries earlier. The "lost" tribes were never entirely lost; a faithful woman of Asher was in the temple on the day the Redeemer was brought in.

Simeon and Anna — a man and a woman, both old, both faithful, both waiting — were God's two witnesses in the temple. Under the Law, "at the mouth of two witnesses" a matter was established (Deuteronomy 19:15).

Wise Men From the East

Matthew now picks up the story, some time later.

> **Matthew 2:1** *Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem,*
>
> **Matthew 2:2** *Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.*

"Wise men" translates the Greek *magoi*, **magi**. The magi were a learned priestly class from Persia and Babylon, known for their study of the stars, dreams and ancient writings. Six centuries earlier, the prophet Daniel had been made "master of the magicians, astrologers, Chaldeans, and soothsayers" in Babylon (Daniel 5:11). As this series understands it, it is quite possible that Daniel's teaching about the coming Messiah, and the old prophecy of Balaam — "there shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Numbers 24:17) — had been remembered among them.

The Bible does not say there were three. It does not say they were kings. It does not name them. (The names Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar came many centuries later.) It names three *gifts*, and tradition turned that into three men. There may have been more, travelling with a sizeable company, since their arrival "troubled" all Jerusalem.

"We have seen his star in the east" — better, *we have seen His star at its rising*. What the star was, scripture does not say. Some take it as a miraculous light created for the purpose. Others, including astronomers who have studied the sky of those years, point to a remarkable series of conjunctions of the planet Jupiter (which the ancients called the king planet) with the star Regulus (the "king star") and with Venus in 3–2 B.C. However it was done, the star did something no ordinary star does: it "went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was" (2:9).

"To worship him." The Greek word, *proskuneo*, means to bow down, to pay homage by kneeling or falling prostrate. It is used of homage to God, and also of homage given to a king or great man (as in Matthew 18:26, where a servant "worshipped" his master). The magi came to do homage to a newborn king.

A Troubled King

> **Matthew 2:3** *When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.*
>
> **Matthew 2:4** *And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born.*
>
> **Matthew 2:5** *And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet,*
>
> **Matthew 2:6** *And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.*

Herod was "King of the Jews" by Rome's appointment. Foreigners were now asking for the one "*born* King of the Jews." Herod was an old man, sick, and ferociously jealous of his throne. He had already had his own wife Mariamne and three of his own sons executed on suspicion of plotting against him. The emperor Augustus is reported to have joked that it was better to be Herod's pig than Herod's son. "All Jerusalem" was troubled with him — they knew what Herod did when he was afraid.

The chief priests and scribes knew the answer immediately: Bethlehem, from the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). They knew the scripture well enough to point the way. Not one of them walked the six miles to see.

> **Matthew 2:7** *Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared.*
>
> **Matthew 2:8** *And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.*

"Privily" — secretly. Herod wanted the date of the star's first appearance, so that he would know how old the child was. "That I may come and worship him also" was a lie.

Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh

> **Matthew 2:9** *When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.*
>
> **Matthew 2:10** *When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.*
>
> **Matthew 2:11** *And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh.*

Notice the words. Luke's shepherds found a "babe" (Greek *brephos*, a newborn) "lying in a manger." Matthew's magi found a "young child" (Greek *paidion*, a small child) in "the house." The magi did not come on the night of the birth. They came later, perhaps a year or more — which is why Herod would kill the boys "from two years old and under." The manger scenes that put the wise men beside the shepherds combine two events that were months apart.

"Rejoiced with exceeding great joy" — in Greek, literally *rejoiced a great joy exceedingly*. Matthew piles up the words to show how great their joy was.

"They fell down, and worshipped *him*" — not Mary. The magi did homage to the child.

The gifts were costly — gifts fit for a king. Gold was the treasure of kings. Frankincense was a fragrant resin burned in the temple's holy incense. Myrrh was a fragrant resin used in anointing oil, in perfume and in preparing bodies for burial; Nicodemus would bring "a mixture of myrrh and aloes" to bury Jesus (John 19:39). Christian writers have long seen in the three gifts a picture of Jesus as King, as the one who would bring us to God, and as the one who would die. Scripture does not explain the gifts; that reading is an inference, but a fitting one. More practically, as this series understands it, gold given by wealthy foreigners would have paid for a poor family's sudden flight to Egypt.

Flight Into Egypt

> **Matthew 2:12** *And being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way.*
>
> **Matthew 2:13** *And when they were departed, behold, the angel of the Lord appeareth to Joseph in a dream, saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and flee into Egypt, and be thou there until I bring thee word: for Herod will seek the young child to destroy him.*
>
> **Matthew 2:14** *When he arose, he took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt:*
>
> **Matthew 2:15** *And was there until the death of Herod: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Out of Egypt have I called my son.*

A second dream for Joseph, and again he obeyed at once — that same night. Egypt was outside Herod's reach, a Roman province with a large Jewish population in Alexandria.

"Out of Egypt have I called my son." Hosea wrote those words about the nation of Israel: "When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1). Matthew saw a pattern. Israel, God's son, went down into Egypt and was called out. Jesus, God's Son, went down into Egypt and was called out. Jesus would relive Israel's history, and succeed where Israel had failed.

Rachel Weeping

> **Matthew 2:16** *Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men.*
>
> **Matthew 2:17** *Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying,*
>
> **Matthew 2:18** *In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.*

This is the darkest part of the Christmas story, and it is almost never told. Herod had the boys of Bethlehem and its surrounding district killed, two years old and under. Bethlehem was a small town; historians estimate perhaps a dozen to a few dozen little boys died. To Herod it was a small matter. To their mothers it was everything.

Why did God allow it? The Bible does not blame God for Herod's murders. Herod did them. Scripture shows us that the adversary — the one Genesis 3:15 said would bruise the heel of the woman's seed — tried from the very beginning to destroy the child. Revelation pictures it: a dragon standing before a woman about to give birth, "for to devour her child as soon as it was born" (Revelation 12:4). God

protected His Son, warning Joseph in a dream. The deaths of those children were the work of a murderous king and of the murderer behind him, and they grieved God.

Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife, died giving birth near Bethlehem and was buried "in the way to Ephrath, which is Beth-lehem" (Genesis 35:19). Jeremiah had pictured her weeping for her children as Israel was carried into exile (Jeremiah 31:15). Matthew heard that same weeping again in Bethlehem. It is **prosopopoeia**, or personification — a figure of speech in which someone long dead, or something that is not a person, is pictured speaking or acting. Rachel, the mother of the nation, weeps from her grave for her murdered children. But in Jeremiah the very next words are, "Refrain thy voice from weeping… there is hope in thine end" (Jeremiah 31:16-17). The child who escaped was the hope.

Home to Nazareth

> **Matthew 2:19** *But when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeareth in a dream to Joseph in Egypt,*
> **Matthew 2:20** *Saying, Arise, and take the young child and his mother, and go into the land of Israel: for they are dead which sought the young child's life.*
> **Matthew 2:21** *And he arose, and took the young child and his mother, and came into the land of Israel.*
> **Matthew 2:22** *But when he heard that Archelaus did reign in Judaea in the room of his father Herod, he was afraid to go thither: notwithstanding, being warned of God in a dream, he turned aside into the parts of Galilee:*
> **Matthew 2:23** *And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth: that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, He shall be called a Nazarene.*

Herod died, painfully, soon after. Josephus describes his last illness in grim detail. His son Archelaus was just as cruel; he began his reign by massacring some three thousand people at the temple at Passover. So Joseph, warned in a fourth dream, took his family north to Nazareth.

"He shall be called a Nazarene." No single Old Testament verse says this. Matthew says it was spoken "by the prophets" — plural — meaning the general sense of several prophecies. Many see a play on the Hebrew word *netzer*, *branch*: "there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a Branch shall grow out of his roots" (Isaiah 11:1). The Branch grew up in Branch-town. And to be "a Nazarene" meant to come from a despised little village — the prophets had also said the Messiah would be "despised and rejected of men" (Isaiah 53:3).

> **Luke 2:40** *And the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him.*

Jesus grew up. He learned. "Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52). He was a real boy who became a real man.

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The seed of the woman, at last. Genesis 3:15 promised a seed of the woman who would crush the adversary's head. Jesus is the only person in history born of a woman without a human father — "made of a woman" (Galatians 4:4), conceived by the power of God.

Born to die, raised to live, exalted to reign. From the beginning, this birth pointed ahead. His name meant *the LORD saves* — "he shall save his people from their sins." Simeon warned of a sword. The magi brought myrrh. The adversary tried to kill Him as a baby and would try again at the cross. There, the adversary bruised His heel: He died for our sins. But God raised Him from the dead on the third day, and He was "declared to be the Son of God with power… by the resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). Then He ascended to God's right hand. Revelation 12 puts the whole story into one verse: the woman "brought forth a man child, who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron: and her child was caught up unto God, and to his throne" (Revelation 12:5). Birth, then throne.

The King of the Jews. The magi asked, "Where is he that is born King of the Jews?" Thirty-some years later, the same title was nailed above His head on the cross: "THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS" (Matthew 27:37). The foreigners at the beginning knew who He was. His own nation's leaders, at the end, did not.

Son of God, not God the Son. Luke 1:35 gives the reason Jesus is the Son of God: God was His Father. He is God's only begotten Son — a real, human, sinless man, uniquely conceived, the one mediator between God and men.

To the Grace Administration

Born of God. Jesus was born of God by God's own creative power. Under grace, every believer is also "born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible" (1 Peter 1:23). We are not sons of God in the unique way Jesus is — He alone had no human father — but we are truly God's children. "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God… now are we the sons of God" (1 John 3:1-2).

Sons by adoption. Paul continues the very verse about the birth: God sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, "To redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God hath sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying, Abba, Father" (Galatians 4:5-6). The birth in Bethlehem made our birth into God's family possible.

Good tidings to all people. The angel's news was "to all people." Simeon called the child "a light to lighten the Gentiles." Foreign magi came to honour Him. In the grace administration, the Gentiles are "fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3:6).

God uses ordinary people. A teenage girl, a carpenter, shepherds, two old saints. Every believer today is called to the same simple response Mary gave: "be it unto me according to thy word."

To the Topic of God Keeping His Promises

Every part of this story is a promise kept: the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15); the Star out of Jacob (Numbers 24:17); a son of David on David's throne (2 Samuel 7:12-16); a virgin with child (Isaiah 7:14); Bethlehem (Micah 5:2); a Branch from Jesse's root (Isaiah 11:1). God took thousands of years, used a Roman emperor's decree, and moved stars and kings to keep His word to the letter. He will keep every promise He has made to us, including the promise of His Son's return.

The Main Takeaway

God kept His oldest promise exactly as He said He would — through the birth of His own Son, the seed of the woman — and He will keep every promise He has made to us.

- **Jesus is the Son of God because God was His Father** (Luke 1:35).
- **He came to save His people from their sins** — the meaning of His name.
- **God works through humble, willing people.** "Be it unto me according to thy word."
- **Faithfulness is costly and worth it.** Mary and Joseph both accepted shame to obey God.
- **The good news is for all people** — shepherds, old saints, Gentile stargazers, and us.
- **Read what the Bible actually says.** The real story is richer than the Christmas card.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Mary.** A young virgin of Nazareth, betrothed to Joseph, who believed God's word and said, "be it unto me according to thy word." She called God "my Saviour," brought a sin offering at her purification, and later bore other children. A woman of great faith and courage.
- **Joseph.** A carpenter of David's line, "a just man," who meant to divorce Mary quietly, then obeyed God's word in four dreams — taking Mary as his wife, naming the child, fleeing to Egypt, and settling in Nazareth. Jesus' legal father.
- **Gabriel.** The angel who announced the births of John and of Jesus.
- **Elisabeth and Zacharias.** Mary's older relative and her priest husband, parents in old age of John the Baptist.
- **The shepherds.** Men of low standing who received the first announcement, came "with haste," and told everyone.
- **Simeon.** A just and devout old man who had been promised he would see the Messiah; he held the child and called Him God's salvation and "a light to lighten the Gentiles."
- **Anna.** An aged widow and prophetess of the tribe of Asher who served in the temple and spoke of the child to all who looked for redemption.
- **The magi.** Learned men from the east who followed His star, did homage to the young child, brought gold, frankincense and myrrh, and went home another way.
- **Herod the Great.** The Idumean king of Judaea under Rome, a great builder and a murderer, who killed Bethlehem's little boys to destroy a rival king.
- **Archelaus.** Herod's son, as cruel as his father, whose reign in Judaea sent Joseph to Galilee.

- **Jesus.** The seed of the woman, the Son of God, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth, who "increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man."

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Betrothal.** A legally binding marriage contract, usually a year before the wedding; the couple were called husband and wife, and only a divorce could end it.
- **"Knew" / "I know not a man."** A modest Hebrew way of speaking of sexual relations.
- **Private divorce.** A betrothal could be ended quietly before a few witnesses rather than in a public court.
- **Dreams.** God spoke to Joseph and to the magi by dreams, one of the ways He gave revelation in that time.
- **The census.** Registration by family and home town, for taxes or loyalty.
- **The guest room (*kataluma*).** The spare room of a family home — not a commercial inn.
- **The village house and the manger.** Families lived on a raised floor, with animals brought into a lower level at night and feeding troughs at the edge.
- **Swaddling.** Wrapping a newborn tightly in cloth strips — a sign of care.
- **Shepherds.** Outdoor workers of low social standing, whose testimony later rabbis would not accept in court.
- **Circumcision on the eighth day** and the **naming** of the child.
- **Purification and presentation.** Forty days after a son's birth, the mother's offering at the temple; the firstborn son presented to the Lord; two birds as the offering of the poor.
- **Magi.** A learned priestly class of Persia and Babylon who studied the stars.
- **Kneeling homage (*proskuneo*).** Bowing or falling down before a king or superior.
- **Royal gifts.** Gold, frankincense and myrrh — costly goods from the east, fit for a king.
- **Herod's household.** A king who executed his own wife and sons on suspicion of plotting.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Euphemism** — a gentle expression in place of a blunt one. "I know not a man" (Luke 1:34); "knew her not" (Matthew 1:25).
- **Parallelism** — saying the same thing twice in different words. "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee" (Luke 1:35).
- **Synecdoche** — a whole put for a part, or a part for a whole. "All the world should be taxed" — the Roman world (Luke 2:1).
- **Metaphor** — speaking of one thing as another. "A sword shall pierce through thy own soul" (Luke 2:35); "a light to lighten the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32).
- **Prosopopoeia (personification)** — picturing the dead, or a thing, as a living person acting or speaking. "Rachel weeping for her children" (Matthew 2:18).
- **Heaping of words for emphasis** — "rejoiced with exceeding great joy" (Matthew 2:10).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **No inn, no innkeeper, no stable.** The "inn" was most likely the guest room of a family home; the baby was laid in a manger in the house.
- **No ox and ass, no cave.** Those come from later tradition.
- **The Bible does not say there were three wise men**, or that they were kings, or name them. It names three gifts.
- **The wise men did not come to the manger.** They came later, to "the house," and found a "young child" (Matthew 2:11).
- **The Bible does not give Jesus' birth date.** December 25 appears centuries later; shepherds in the fields at night fits the warmer months better.
- **The angels are not said to have sung.** They were "praising God, and saying."
- **Jesus is called the Son of God because God was His Father** (Luke 1:35) — not because He is God.
- **"Emmanuel, God with us" is a name** declaring that God was with His people through His Son.
- **Mary called God "my Saviour" and brought a sin offering.** She was not sinless.
- **Mary did not remain a virgin.** Joseph "knew her not till" Jesus was born; Jesus had brothers and sisters.
- **The magi worshipped the child, not Mary.**
- **Herod murdered Bethlehem's little boys**, and God did not do it; He protected His Son from a murderer.

God's Will and Intent

- **God keeps His promises.** "When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son."
- **God provided the Redeemer.** He did not become the Redeemer; He fathered Him.
- **God wanted salvation for all people** — "good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people."
- **God protected His Son** from the adversary's first attempt to destroy Him.
- **God chose the humble.** A village girl, a carpenter, shepherds, a poor family's offering.
- **God guides those who listen.** Mary believed; Joseph obeyed four times; the magi followed the star and heeded the dream.
- **God intended the cradle to lead to the cross, the empty tomb and the throne** — and from there to our new birth as His children.